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ABSTRACT

In October 1999 young adult author, Adam Rapp, was the first author-in-residence at Ridgewood High School, located outside Chicago. During his week at Ridgewood, Adam did readings and question and answer sessions for area 7th and 8th graders who came to the high school on field trips. He talked with the staff of the high school literary magazine and worked on writing with the 12th grade creative writing class. But his biggest success was his contact with the 9th grade English skills classes, a program for freshmen who need extra help with their reading and language proficiency. Most of the kids are Polish immigrants who have been speaking English for only a few years, and many of them said that this was the first time they had ever read a book all the way through. A grant that made all this possible was titled "Bring in an Expert," and Adam Rapp was chosen because he had grown up in Illinois. The program was set up this way: the nearby Eisenhower Public Library was the financial agent for the project; Ridgewood High set up all the schedules and booked classrooms; both libraries purchased multiple copies of Adam's book, "The Buffalo Tree"; the novel was read before Adam's visit; invitations were sent to area junior high schools; Adam booked his own flights; he stayed at a bed-and-breakfast for five nights for $500; and the balance of the $4500 grant was his speaker's fee. The response was so positive that Adam will return next year. (NKA)

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by Penny Blubaugh

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An Author in Residence? Why Bother?

Penny Blubaugh

During Teen Read Week, in October of 1999, young adult author Adam Rapp was the first author-in-residence at Ridgewood High School, a district school serving two villages surrounded by Chicago; Norridge and Harwood Heights, Illinois. That week, he says, "was one of the most surprisingly important events of my career as an author."

Adam has published three books. His second novel, The Buffalo Tree, is a hard-hitting, finely drawn portrait of Sura, a sensitive kid who's serving time in an Illinois juvenile detention facility for stealing hoodys, or hood ornaments, from automobiles. Adam based the dangers and abuses, as well as the friendships Sura experiences, on his own time in detention. The result is a tough, scary, believable book that can really speak to kids.

During his week at Ridgewood, Adam did readings and question and answer sessions for area 7th and 8th graders who came to the high school on field trips. He talked with, and did book signings for, the staff of the high school literary magazine, Creative Waves, and for the school newspaper staff. He worked on the art and craft of writing with the 12th grade Creative Writing class. "I spoke about writing and reading and what my experience of literature was at their age, which wasn't much. Then I led them in an automatic writing exercise. The rules were simple: you couldn't lift your pen from the page for ten minutes

even if the writing turned into hieroglyphics. I think many of them actually had fun writing with that kind of velocity, regardless of how nonsensical it came out."

Adam's biggest success, though, was his contact with the 9th grade English Skills classes. "I was in shock when I walked into the first classroom," he says. "There were probably eighty students. Most of them were holding the paperback edition of The Buffalo Tree. I had never seen so many copies of the book alive and well in one room. I had this absurd notion that the teachers had bribed the students to hold them; that they were merely props; that those who chose to wear them on their person would be rewarded with cash prizes or lunch tokens.

"But this obviously wasn't the case. It turned out that they had all read the book. Every single one of them."

English Skills is a program for freshmen who need extra help with their reading and language proficiency. Most of the kids are Polish immigrants who have been speaking English for only a few years. Jeff Burd, their teacher, was eager to have Adam visit and his enthusiasm rubbed off on his students. Adam says, "He'd gotten them excited about reading in a way that I have never seen at that age. He had them create slang dictionaries that accompanied the vernacular of Sura, the hero in my novel. The language in The Buffalo Tree is challenging for any young adult. These new English speakers not only understood the language, but they were speaking it back at me and suggesting new words."

Many of these kids said that this was the first time in their lives that they'd read a book all the way through. They were proud of themselves, and they were ready with questions for the author. "They actually seemed genuinely interested in not only the book but me as a person. The questions ranged from such topics as 'How long did it take you to write the book,' to 'Are they going to make a movie of it,' to 'Do you have a girlfriend?'

Adam was gracious and gave each question a lot of thought and attention. He treated the kids with respect and never ignored or brushed off their comments. The dialogue lasted over an hour.

At Jeff's suggestion, students had made their own covers for The Buffalo Tree showing their favorite scenes, and the poster sized art hung everywhere. "Somehow, this almost moved me to tears," Adam admits. "I'm still not sure why. It guess it's because they actually took the time. At the end of the class many of the students asked me to sign their posters so I got to meet several of them individually." Most of the posters were later displayed at the library along with extra copies of the book, ready for circulation. (All our copies of The Buffalo Tree were out within a week of the program and there were holds on our single copy of Adam's first novel, Missing the Piano, currently out of print.) Adam returned to the English Skills class several times during the week and worked with them on writing assignments.

By the end of the week everyone involved in the program was more than pleased. Adam got rave reviews from both faculty and students and said, "With novels, there's this built-in disappearing act. I can write the story but there is no

immediate public culpability. The book is a thing on its own. At Norridge, this romantic idea I had of novelist-as-escape-artist was instantly proven false, and for all the right reasons."

So, how did we make this all work?

Ridgewood High School is located two blocks from Eisenhower Public Library District. Students use both libraries heavily and the cooperation between the two institutions has always been very good. We normally schedule joint book talks at least once a year. I've been to teacher meetings as the library representative. Cheryl Flinn, Ridgewood's librarian, calls us often to direct loan materials for both students and faculty, and, even better, she sends us assignment sheets that we keep on file. Ridgewood gives Eisenhower home page space and Eisenhower has filmed two videos using Ridgewood's video and editing equipment, and their television studio. When Cheryl and I decided to apply jointly for a LSTA grant funded by the State Library of Illinois we were already working from a long-standing base of cooperative projects.

The grant we applied for was titled "Bring in an Expert." We thought of Adam because he had grown up in Illinois, lived for a time in Joliet and Chicago and had gone to military school just across the border in Wisconsin. (One of the suggestions for the grant was that the "expert" be from Illinois.) I'd met Adam and thought that his age (30's) would make him someone the kids would be able to relate to. We were also interested in him because of his experiences in

juvenile detention and military school. These were both topics that we felt would be of high interest to the students he'd be in contact with.

Our proposal was submitted to the State Library in April. We applied for $4,500.00, the maximum amount possible. We received notification over the summer that we'd been awarded the full amount. All funds were to be encumbered by November 30th, so we were working within a tight time frame. We set up the program this way:

1. Eisenhower was the financial agent for the project.

2. Ridgewood set up all schedules and booked classrooms.

3. Both libraries purchased multiple copies of The Buffalo Tree. Ridgewood bought extras to sell for book signings.

4. Jeff scheduled the reading of the novel and related activities so that students would be finishing the book just before Adam's visit.

5. Both Cheryl and I sent invitations to area junior high schools, including letters to principals, superintendents and school library media specialists. Cheryl kept track of which schools responded to the invitation, as well as the number of students each school would bring. Approximately two hundred students came over two days to hear readings and ask questions.

6. Adam booked his own flights. Eisenhower sent him an advance travel allowance of $600.00 and let him pick the time and the airline that would most suit his needs.

7. I met him at the airport and took him to the bed and breakfast we'd chosen. Adam was faxed a description of the place in advance so he could

approve the choice. The cost of the bed and breakfast ($500.00 for five nights) was similar to the cost of a hotel and gave him a more comfortable place to live. It was close to public transportation and the expressway.

8. Cheryl, Jeff and I, along with members of the Eisenhower staff, took Adam to a restaurant of his choice early during the residency week. This made us all more comfortable with each other and facilitated our working relationship.

9. The balance of the $4,500.00 was his speaker's fee, and he earned every penny. Eisenhower cut the final check while he was here so he was able to leave with money in his pocket.

10. With Cheryl's help, I filled out the reports for the state and returned them several weeks before the deadline.

11. We collapsed, thrilled with our success!

The whole program went very smoothly. The response from everyone involved was so positive that we're planning on having Adam return this year. This time we'll be funding him with money from Eisenhower and Ridgewood. Without the state grant we'll have less to spend, so we're streamlining the program but still following the same general guidelines. Our plan is to continue this author-in-residence program as a jointly-run, annual event.